

# **Toward Critical Theory for Public Folklore: An Annotated Bibliography**

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Philosophers have interpreted the world in various ways, but the task  
is to change it.

—Karl Marx

## **Preface**

The development of theory has been a key issue in public folklore in recent years, and, in particular, has characterized the interaction of public and academic folklore. Should public folklore be an application of academic theories to the public realm? Should public folklore develop its own theories, or its own single unifying theory? Should public folklore theory rise out of practice? Should public folklore eschew theory?

In the theorizing carried out by academics, rarely does theory itself—its nature and uses—become the focus. Raymond Williams traces the word “theory” to the seventeenth century, where it meant something like “speculation,” or a system of ideas. Williams points out that, even at that date, the concept of theory was inseparable from the concept of practice (1976:266). Praxis, a term that also goes back to the seventeenth century, implies the inseparable link between theory and practice; each must be constantly informed by the other. This point has been made many times by public folklorists, from B. A. Botkin to Archie Green to Robert Baron.

Turning to the concept of public folklore, there are three closely related usages that are not always distinguished from each other:

1. “Public sector folklore” refers to programs that are housed in public institutions at the federal, state, or local levels. In common usage, this excludes academia, although state-supported institutions of higher education are, of course, public institutions.

2. “Folklore programs that serve the public” generally refers to non-academic programs, although institutions of higher education also exist to serve the public. Public folklore in this sense includes both public and private institutions, independents, and folklorists who use their expertise to solve a variety of cultural, social, medical, political, economic, or environmental problems.

3. “Public folklore” may also refer to a role for folklorists in public debates and dialogs about current issues. This usage is less common but it is

a critical one. Simon Bronner, for example, has called for folklorists to participate in the ongoing political and ideological battle surrounding the definition of "tradition" (Bronner 1998).

Ultimately, the products created by public folklorists are the best evidence of public folklore theory: exhibits, catalogs, radio shows, Web sites, CDs, CD-ROMs, videotapes, festivals, teacher training guides and lesson plans, community scholar programs, refugee programs, and various other projects. Be they good, bad, or indifferent, such products and programs emerge from the intersection of theory and practice. A survey of such products would be very valuable but also would be a huge and difficult task. It is not the purpose of this essay. Many of the emerging issues in public folklore, such as cultural tourism, cultural impact statements, and refugee issues, also merit their own bibliographies.

This bibliography is a survey of the academic and critical literature on public folklore. It is here that the development of public folklore theory has been most explicitly addressed. The bibliography includes a few works that do not focus specifically on public folklore but address concepts that are central to our work, such as authenticity and tradition. It does not cover the history of public folklore to any extent or the important topic of folklore and education. It is not meant to be comprehensive, and certainly not an update of Steve Siporin's "Public Folklore: A Bibliographic Introduction" (in Baron and Spitzer 1992), which readers are urged to consult. The earliest entry in my bibliography is 1971, when the Point Park Conference on Applied Folklore took place.

For a more immediate, "in the trenches" exposure to contemporary public folklore, readers are referred to Publore (the public folklore listserve) and to the *Public Programs Newsletter* (the newsletter of the Public Programs Section of the American Folklore Society).

### References Cited

Williams, Raymond. 1976. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. New York: Oxford University Press.

### Suggested Readings

Baron, Robert and Nicholas R. Spitzer, eds. 1992. *Public Folklore*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.

This volume is the closest thing we have to a "state of the art" anthology of public folklore. While some of the essays represent the "official" viewpoints of the directors of the major federal folklife institutions, the volume also includes a reprint of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's "Mistaken Dichotomies," Spitzer's "Cultural Conversation," Robert McCarl's "A Glimpse of the Pattern That Connects," and Frank Proschan's "Field Work and Social Work." The volume also includes

several excellent articles on the history of public folklore and Steve Siporin's very useful "Public Folklore: A Bibliographic Introduction."

- Bauman, Richard, Patricia Sawin, and Inta Gale Carpenter. 1992. *Reflections on the Folklife Festival: An Ethnography of Participant Experience*. Bloomington: Indiana University Folklore Institute, Special Publications no. 2.

A team of folklorists from Indiana University interviewed Michigan participants in the 1987 Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife to evaluate the festival from the point of view of participating artists. The authors conclude that artists are as much shapers of the festival as anyone else; they have their own perceptions and agendas, which may not be the same as those of the festival organizers.

- Becker, Jane S. 1988. Revealing Traditions: The Politics of Culture and Community in America, 1888–1988. In *Folk Roots, New Roots: Folklore in American Life*, ed. Jane S. Becker and Barbara Franco. Lexington, MA: Museum of Our National Heritage.

Becker's essay is a survey of American political and cultural movements that have turned to folk culture as an alternative to mass society. Public folklorists most constantly negotiate between folklorists' versus non-folklorists' understanding concepts of "folk culture." This essay is a useful start in considering the latter.

- Bendix, Regina. 1997. *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

In this comparative history of German and American folkloristics, Bendix emphasizes the shaping of the field by the concept of authenticity, and the ways that this concept so often serves to separate or exclude rather than bring together, to condemn the "inauthentic" (be it folklore or people) as much as to celebrate the "authentic." Although her book focuses primarily on academic folklorists, her critique of authenticity speaks to public folklorists as well.

- Bendix, Regina, and Gisela Welz, eds. 1999. *Cultural Brokerage: Forms of Intellectual Practice in Society*. Special issue of the *Journal of Folklore Research* 36:2-3, May-December.

This collection of essays, abstracts, and commentary grew out of the July 1998 Bad Homburg Symposium on Public Folklore. Although many of the German and American folklorists seem to be speaking past rather than to each other, the essays nevertheless convey valuable critical perspectives on public folklore in the United States and Germany and more broadly on "culturism." Essays include Roger Abrahams's quick

history of academic and public folklore in America, Mary Hufford's call for folklorists to work within the "cracks in the hegemonic order" in order to broker local knowledge back into the marketplace of cultural ideas, Wolfgang Kaschuba's comparison of German and American concepts of "multiculturalism," Peter Niedermüller's consideration of "cultural fundamentalism" and multiculturalism in postcommunist Eastern Europe, Frank Korom's insights into the inescapably political nature of public folklore as exemplified by an exhibit on the culture of Tibetan exiles, and Robert Baron's call for a folkloristics in which theory and practice are equally valued, and are inextricably linked through practices of representation.

Bronner, Simon J. 1998. *Following Tradition: Folklore in the Discourse of American Culture*. Logan: Utah State University Press.

Bronner places the concept of "tradition" as used by folklorists into a broad context of American cultural history. His book is an important examination of a term used with great frequency by public folklorists.

Cantwell, Robert. 1993. *Ethnomimesis: Folklife and the Representation of Culture*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

The author puts the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife at the heart of a broad study of the role of cultural representation in Western civilization. In this at-times difficult book, Cantwell sees the folk festival as the cutting edge of cultural production, in which everyone participates—administrators, folklorists, presenters, artists, and audience members. The festival is studied as a form of cultural creation through representation.

Collins, Camilla, ed. 1980. Folklore and the Public Sector. *Kentucky Folklore Record* 26:1-2.

Although dated, it is still an interesting collection of essays, including such gems as "Six Reasons Not to Produce Folklife Festivals," by Charles Camp and Timothy Lloyd.

Feintuch, Burt, ed. 1988. *The Conservation of Culture: Folklorists and the Public Sector*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988.

This volume arose from a conference that took place at Western Kentucky University in 1985. With articles that explore a wide variety of historical, practical, theoretical, ethical, and ideological issues, it well represented public folklore as of 1988. A number of articles are still required reading, including Jack Santino's analysis of the way that the "Living Celebrations" events at the Smithsonian became in themselves rituals that validated cultural pluralism, Robert McCarl's discussion of the politics of

presenting occupational folklife at a festival, Jean Haskell Spear's analysis of the potential for conflict and empowerment created by a community folklife project, and Shalom Staub's critique of the use of "authenticity" by public folklorists. The articles are framed by Archie Green's call for responsibility and social activism and by David Whisnant's discussion of the dangers and potentials of folklore as cultural intervention.

*Folklore In Use: Applications in the Real World* (Middlesex, UK), volumes 1-3 (1993-1995). Ed. by David Shuldiner.

This short-lived journal took an international perspective, publishing a number of important critical articles on public/applied folklore as well as special issues on specific topics (see the Wells and Sommers entries in this bibliography).

Hansen, Gregory. 1999. Theorizing Public Folklore: Folklore Work as Systematic Cultural Intervention. *Folklore Forum* 30:1/2.

Hansen argues that public folklore theory emerges from the meeting of theory and practice in the process of cultural intervention, when carried out systematically and critically.

Hufford, Mary, ed. 1994. *Conserving Culture: A New Discourse on Heritage*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

International and interdisciplinary in scope, this volume grew out of a conference held at the Library of Congress in 1990. Essays utilize the concept of "cultural conservation" in a variety of ways. Topics include the creation of Heritage Parks in post-industrial Pennsylvania (Abrams and Staub), the use of Navajo concepts of history in doing historic preservation on the Navajo reservation (Downer et. al.), the preservation of sweetgrass as a material for basketry in South Carolina (Rosengarten), the Family Farm Movement (Rikoon et. al.), conducting a folklife assessment in the siting process for a nuclear waste facility (Sommers et. al.), and many others. Also included is a reprint of Robert Cantwell's important article, "Conjuring Culture: Ideology and Magic in the Festival of American Folklife."

Jones, Michael Owen, ed. 1994. *Putting Folklore To Use*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press.

This ground-breaking anthology looks at the application of folklore to a variety of social problems and public and private venues. Beginning with Jones's extended essay on "Applying Folklore Studies," which is easily the most useful and comprehensive single essay on the topic, this volume includes Marjorie Bard on using personal experience narratives as a tool in aiding the homeless, Kristin Congdon on using folklore to

“democratize art therapy,” Sara Selene Faulds on using folklore methodologies in the design of public spaces, David Shuldiner on promoting self-worth among the aging, Jones on organizational behavior, David Hufford on the role of folklorists in health care, and a variety of other topics. This book extends the scope of folkloristics well beyond the categories of “academic” and “public.”

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 1988. Mistaken Dichotomies. *Journal of American Folklore* 101:140-55.

This key essay has been the center of much subsequent debate about the role of public folklore and its relation to the academy. Although the author describes folklore as an “inescapably applied discipline” and decries the “mistaken dichotomy” between academic and applied, much of her article is a critique of public folklore, raising issues of advocacy, representation, and the celebratory nature of much public folklore.

Kurin, Richard. 1997. *Reflections of a Culture Broker: A View from the Smithsonian*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.

This examination of the process of “brokering culture,” written by the director of the Smithsonian’s Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, looks at a variety of examples from the Smithsonian, with the most attention given to festivals in general and the Festival of American Folklife in particular. Kurin’s book is well written, engaging, and thoughtful, providing much useful information on the process of cultural representation. In places, however, it descends into propaganda for Kurin’s programs and shows a dismaying lack of tolerance for criticism of those programs.

Loomis, Ormond. 1985. *Cultural Conservation: The Protection of Cultural Heritage in the United States*. Washington, D. C.: American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

A key document that made the term “cultural conservation” central to the discourse of public folklore. It contains a useful list of “significant legislation, activities and events related to cultural conservation,” 1846-1980.

Payne, Jessica M., and David Shuldiner, eds. 1998. *Point Park Revisited: Legacies and New Perspectives on Applied Folklore*. Special issue of the *Journal of Folklore Research* 35:3, September-December.

This collection of essays grew out of papers given at the 1996 American Folklore Society conference, which were conceived as an update or reaction to the 1971 Point Park College meeting on applied folklore (see Sweterlitsch,

*Papers on Applied Folklore*). Articles include David Shuldiner's plea not to belittle oral arts and oral cultures in America's public schools, Sandy Rikoon and Robin Albee's fascinating account of the complicated interplay of public policy and traditional knowledge in the struggle over the treatment of wild horses on the Ozark National Scenic Riverways, and articles by Gala True and David Hufford on folklorists' roles in health care. Jessica Payne's powerful article, "The Politicization of Culture in Applied Folklore," calls for an openness about the politics of applied folklore and suggests that folklorists develop collaborative approaches that address social problems and inequities. She presents a number of case studies to illustrate her points.

Price, Richard and Sally. 1994. *On The Mall: Presenting Maroon Tradition-Bearers at the 1992 Festival of American Folklife*. Bloomington: Indiana University Folklore Institute, Special Publications no. 4.

Anthropologists Richard and Sally Price's account of presenting Maroon communities from throughout the Americas at the Smithsonian festival, this volume is highly critical and has been accused of being one-sided (e.g., Kurin, *Reflections of a Culture Broker*); nevertheless, it is a thought-provoking account of the risks inherent in the presentation of "exotic" cultures by cultural professionals to the general American public. The Prices tend to see folk festivals as a kind of cultural appropriation and subjugation of the "other"; nevertheless, their conclusions are ambiguous. They do not reject the idea of folk festivals.

Sommers, Laurie Kay, ed. 1994. *Michigan on the Mall*. Middlesex, UK: Hislarik Press (originally an issue of *Folklore In Use*).

This collection of essays and interviews is a follow up to and a critique of Bauman et al., *Reflections on the Folklife Festival*. It includes essays that present the folklorists' point of view, as opposed to the participants' point of view, and several follow-up interviews with artists who were interviewed for the earlier study.

Sweterlitsch, Dick, ed. 1971. *Papers on Applied Folklore. Folklore Forum Bibliographic and Special Studies*, no. 8.

While many of these papers from the seminal Point Park College meeting on applied folklore are dated, it is interesting to compare them with contemporary concepts of public folklore. Of particular interest is Henry and Betty-Jo Glassie's "Implication of Folkloristic Thought for Historic Zoning Ordinances" and Dorson's infamous denunciation of applied folklore.

Wells, Patricia Atkinson, ed. *Keys to the Marketplace: Problems and Issues in Cultural and Heritage Tourism*. Middlesex, UK: Hislarik Press (originally an issue of *Folklore In Use*).

This collection of essays, which grew out of an issue of *Tennessee's Business* (most of the American articles deal with Tennessee), includes Robert Cogswell's "Grass Roots Issues in Cultural Tourism," which is full of practical suggestions and examples; Francesca MacLean on the marketing of Blackfoot traditional artists; several articles focusing on Appalachian Tennessee; and fascinating articles on the marketing of Aboriginal Australia, the politics of the British Heritage movement, and heritage tourism in South Africa and Egypt.

Whisnant, David E. 1983. *All That Is Native and Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

In addition to being an important work on the history of public folklore, Whisnant's book was crucial in bringing the consideration of folklore as cultural intervention, and the politics of culture, into folkloristics. The author focuses on the unintended consequences, mostly negative, brought about by well-meaning culture workers in southern Appalachia circa 1890-1940. Although it has been argued that the book is one-sided, Whisnant's cautionary thesis can be applied to many times and many places.